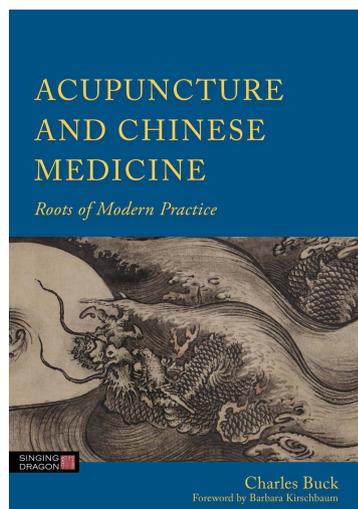


Acupuncture and Chinese medicine: roots of modern practice

Charles Buck. Published by Singing Dragon (Jessica Kingsley Publications), London, 2015, 352 pp. £40.00 (hardback). ISBN: 9781848191594.



The tarred brush of populist superstition too easily paints over the achievements of the real scholars of history (p 24)

Charles Buck, currently chairman of the British Acupuncture Council and a Fellow of the Register of Chinese herbal medicine since 1998, has practised both forms of Chinese medicine (CM) for over 30 years. With a medical science background (a first degree in physiology), he is well known for his practical and engaging seminars on acupuncture needling techniques.

In this nicely presented book, 15 years in the making, he offers a 'plain and readable' account of the history of CM and its ideas, based on reliable sources in English and Chinese but without the clutter of academic footnotes and referencing. Arranged chronologically, the seven main chapters cover medicine in China before the Han dynasty, during the Han, in the post-Han and Tang dynasties, and so on up to the Qing and early 20th century. In attempting to cram such a vast

amount of material into a single volume, the result is inevitably somewhat selective and, despite the primacy of 'acupuncture' in the title, disappointingly focuses more on herbal medicine (especially, for example, in the Song dynasty chapter).

Nonetheless, this is a worthwhile read, particularly as it is probably the only readily accessible book that even attempts to cover the whole history of CM for its relevance to modern practice. Straightforward, unfussy, mostly accurate and yet creative and bursting with original interpretations, the book offers a 'respectful appraisal' of the tradition rather than one based on assumptions and prejudice or an uncritical repetition of the liturgy of Traditional Chinese Medicine theory. The author's sympathies still lie with physiology and 'true science' rather than Daoism and its befuddlement of 'speculative mysticism ... not ... well grounded in pragmatic reality' (p 134). His approach will thus appeal to those who find discussions of *qi* and energy flow through meridians irrelevant to practice: 'the glorious origins of acupuncture (are) probably amongst a group of boil-lancers rather than energy medicine physicians' (p 92).

The author's dislike of mystical obfuscation is clear, too, in his judgemental approach to the pre-classical methods of shamanic medicine, whose practitioners he dismisses as 'intoxicated epileptic seers' (p 38) 'with schizotypal and obsessive personality disorders' (p 32). A number of related themes weave through the book—for example, the opposition (and sometimes interaction) of the classical, complex, pattern-based medicine of the *literati* and the court, and the folk medicine of the masses with its roots in shamanism and simple symptomatic

herbalism. Another theme is the changing relationship (not always harmonious) through the dynasties between disease discrimination (*bian bing*) and pattern discrimination (*bian zheng*) (p 156). Buck's sociopolitical stance is evident, too, in his description of how many of the ideas behind CM derive from military strategy and warfare, and his repeated observations on how the class system historically underpinned the various approaches of CM.

Buck's approach is not unbiased. He leans very much towards the system-based medicine of the *literati* and the court rather than a symptom-based approach. At the same time, he appears to approve of the 20th century simplification of the 'over-stuffed ragbag of wisdom and knowledge' that CM had accumulated during its 2.5 millennium history (p 319). Despite this, in his attempts to be inclusive, the sheer volume of information in the book does at times become overwhelming. Flowcharts to summarise interactions between schools of thought would have been useful, as would a glossary: several major terms (eg, *bagang*) are not included in the index, although this is otherwise adequate, if not perfect. The deliberate lack of referencing is frustrating (recommended readings for each chapter would be helpful), and historical accuracy has occasionally been sacrificed for readability—for example, to my knowledge, acupuncture was not actually practised in the West in the 18th century, as implied (p 142), and the journalist James Reston was not given acupuncture for his appendicitis in Beijing in 1971 (p 323) but for postoperative pain following appendectomy.

In conclusion, although this is a book primarily for the 'traditional' rather than the 'Western medical'

acupuncturist, even the latter will appreciate the author's persistent attempts to distance himself from the 'superstition (that) always lurks on the medical fringes' (p 134). However, there is sometimes only a fine line between critical discernment and unnecessary intellectual snobbery, and this is something of which we all need to be wary.

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Competing interests Charles Buck has written two very positive—although not uncritical—reviews of books edited by the present author (published in the

Journal of Chinese Medicine in 2008 and 2011).

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